

- **Give youth a voice in their education by involving them fully in planning, implementing, and evaluating service-learning activities.**

LEARNING IS A LIFELONG PROCESS. ACCESS TO community resources and involvement in challenging community and global issues can spark students' curiosity and motivate them to participate actively in their own education.

From elementary school on, young people need opportunities to make decisions about which service projects they do, all within the context of the school district's content and performance standards. Youth need to be introduced to the concept that learning takes place in the community as well as in the classroom. Service to others needs to be discussed, and the meaning of service and civic responsibility must be developed from the earliest grades. Instead of only talking about

preparing students for their roles as future citizens, adults must also allow youth to be active participants now.

Give Youth a Voice

Youth voice is one of the cornerstones of service-learning. Educators using service-learning have been amazed by young people's capacity to take an active role in community issues. Students make valuable contributions when they have a voice in planning, implementing, and evaluating service activities; therefore, adults working in schools and agencies are now rethinking how they work with youth (Cairn and Kielsmeier 1991, 72–73). Accepting youth as equal partners in both the learning and

service aspects of service-learning fosters youth involvement and enthusiasm as well as leadership development.

When students have a say about what they are learning in school, they are engaged in the educational process. Service-learning can help students become *self-directed* learners who demonstrate curiosity and enthusiasm for new experiences and *knowledgeable problem solvers* who think independently (Bhaerman, Cordell, and Gomez 1998, 38). Although young people do not determine the course content that may be established by local standards committees and approved by local school boards, students should be surveyed for their prior

Why Youth, Why Service, and Why Now?

If policymakers are serious about making any lasting educational and social improvements, it is imperative that young people assume an active, meaningful role within our comprehensive plan(s) to prepare our schools and communities for success in the twenty-first century. We, as young people, are already accepting this challenge. Every day, young people use community service and service-learning as a strategy to affect change in their own schools and communities. Civic minded efforts, such as AmeriCorps* VISTA, Learn and Serve America, local service clubs, and the Conservation Corps, provide us with the opportunity to develop and act upon the belief that service can be an effective way to address some of our society's major concerns. California is at a crossroads where the "business as usual" mentality is no longer sufficient to address current problems. As we stand at this crossroads, let us move forward into a new age where the quality of life and educational opportunity is the product and responsibility of those in service to their communities; and let us foster an environment where a young citizen's voice is sought, heard, respected, and included.

Youth Advisory Council, 1996 Policy Document on Service

knowledge on curricular topics. Students can also help their teachers in determining strategies that will best enable learning.

Research has shown that students learn best when they are actively involved in meaningful experiences (Caine and Caine 1991, 97). Students can design and administer an assessment to determine community needs, analyze the results of the needs assessment, research potential projects, select an appropriate project, plan and implement it, and finally evaluate its effectiveness—all in relationship to what they are learning in their class.

Prepare Youth Leaders

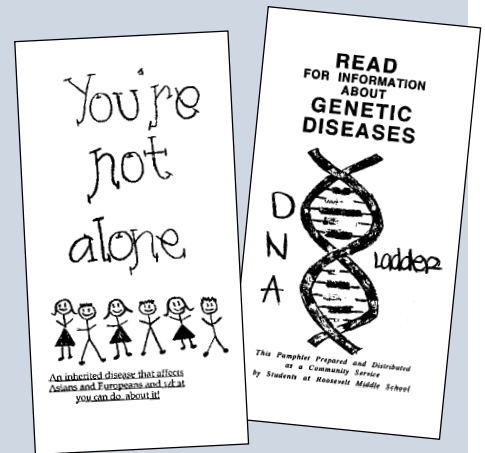
"You don't have to be a certain age or have a certain kind of education or credential to be a leader. Anyone who is willing to think about, act on, and be accountable for the well-being and success of others is a leader. Leaving leadership to only a few people can isolate them with too much responsibility. Instead, many leaders are needed, from many different walks of life, who can learn to share accountability" (Lodge 1998, 56).

Service-learning provides opportunities to develop critical leadership skills (Beane and others 1981, 148). Through ongoing relationships with community agencies, youth gain experience in becoming community liaisons and learn how to form new partnerships as additional projects are determined. While leadership capacity may initially be built through student government and school service clubs, creative strategies must be explored to ensure that diverse groups of youth become involved in leadership roles. Service-learning can be the vehicle through which students, who may not necessarily be recognized as leaders, develop and refine those skills (Cairn and Kielsmeier 1991; Beane and others 1981).

Project YES Students Design Helpful Pamphlets

Middle school students working in the East Bay Conservation Corps Youth Engaged in Service (YES) program identified the problem that many Asians in their community suffer from a disease called Thalassemia. The students researched this disease and discovered that, among all ethnic groups, it affects Asians at the highest rate. The students also determined that cultural barriers, such as shame, distrust of Western medicine, and traditional beliefs, prevented many Asians from getting help. The students designed and published pamphlets describing the disease and its symptoms and pointing out possible cultural barriers to seeking help. They explained where people who felt they were suffering symptoms could get help. These pamphlets were distributed at various school functions, and the students plan to get the materials translated into native languages.

Marjorie Roberts, Science Teacher
Roosevelt Middle School
Oakland Unified School District



Pamphlets were provided courtesy of Roosevelt Middle School, Oakland, California.

Eventually youth can become service-learning trainers. Students can train other young people, teachers, and agency personnel about service-learning.

Allow Time for Reflection

Reflection, another primary component of service-learning, occurs throughout service-learning activities, not just at the end. The concept of reflection is critical, and it is included in the federal definition, which states that “‘service-learning’ is a method that provides structured time for students or participants to reflect on the service experience” (*U.S. Code* [annotated], Vol. 10401–12700, Title 42, Section 12511, Chapter 23 [1995]).

“When people reflect in everyday life, they pause to review, ponder, contemplate, analyze, or evaluate an experience or information to gain deeper understanding. This ability to reflect gives people the freedom, power, and responsibility, perhaps unique among all living things, to continually choose or adjust the direction of their lives. That is why reflection is at the heart of becoming a self-directed and lifelong learner” (Toole and Toole 1995, 100).

In both schools and workplaces, little time is typically devoted to reflection. Whether they are planning a service project, working in the community, or concluding a service activity, students and their mentors need to stop often and reflect on what is occurring. They need to ask, How is this activity linked to what we are studying in school? How is it helping the community? How is it impacting people’s lives?

When young people reflect on their service experience, the relationship of school to the larger world begins to expand (Eyler, Giles, and Schmiede 1996, 18). Reflection may give students an opportunity to incorporate new or additional knowledge and skills into their thinking. Students may also learn lessons about interpersonal skills that would not have been evident without the service opportunity. When students regularly talk or write about service experiences, personal and social responsibility increases along with positive impacts on academic achievement and service leadership (Weiler and others 1998, 145).

Through reflection students may identify new unmet community needs, and the real power of service-learning emerges. Recognizing a need that is not being addressed sets the whole pattern of identification, planning, research, implementation, and evaluation into motion once again; but this time the process is totally student-owned. Youth

Special Education Students Run Recycling Program

Special education students at Mendocino Middle School in the Mendocino Unified School District spearheaded the recycling program at the middle and elementary schools. Students learned about various methods for disposing of waste materials and the advantages and disadvantages of each method. They assessed what needed to be recycled at the schools and designed plans to recycle paper, aluminum, plastic, glass, and kitchen food waste. The students took responsibility for collecting items every week, weighing and charting recyclable materials, and making bimonthly trips to the recycling center in Fort Bragg. In the spring the students held a community fair to show what they had accomplished during the year and to share information about recycling techniques.

Jennifer Kalvass
Teacher, Mendocino Middle School

realize the power of their contribution, embrace it, and use it without hesitation. They feel that their “voice” has been heard.

“We finished note cards. It was fun and easy. The day was not as fun as yesterday though. I think we each have something to learn from each other. I did not find this out until I had time to think by myself. I guess I was too proud to think that I had anything to learn from a sixth grader.”

Reflection of a high school student about his experience as a cross-age tutor

Further Reading Related to This Recommendation

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- Weiler, D., and others. 1998. *An Evaluation of Service-Learning in California, Phase II Final Report*. Emeryville, Calif.: Research Policy Practice International.